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Abstract

Nadia is suddenly awake, uncannily wide awake. She senses everything with sharp and instant clarity. For perhaps a second she compares her sudden jump from the void of a deep and dreamless sleep to this state of alert, with her usual drift out of a warm nothing, into awareness.

JOHN GREEN

Nadia Answers the Call

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She listens carefully, and hears only the night stillness. Everything is absolutely still, as though all the life and movement in the universe has stopped on some invisible order, and must soon, following an unknown cue, burst in an avalanche of tumult. No moreporks. Not even a possum.

Possums still spooked her, to Roger's continuing amusement. They sounded like thoughtful overweight gentlemen as they tromped over the iron roof above the bedroom.

Not tonight though, not even a sighing breeze through the pines.

Little chills like cold fingertips touch her warm spine, wandering up and down. She shivers.

'Somebody walks upon your grave ... somebody walks upon your grave ... somebody walks upon your grave...' intones inside her brain, keeping perfect time with the fluttering chills.

She shivers again and rolls over on her back, flinging her left arm out to the other side of the bed. Roger isn't there. Of course, business in another town. He will be back on Friday. Her hand feels for his place between the sheets. It is unrumpled, crisp and chilly. She arches her back impatiently, pulls the quilt over her head and shuts her eyes tight.

Items to be put on the list for the supermarket. She must remember that because the gas station closes mid-day tomorrow, she will have to fill the car up early. Roger's curriculum vitae has to be typed to go with his job application (he left the letter, signed, with an envelope that's too small, on the shelf by the telephone). Where is he taking her? Does she have to go? She must let Suzie have that moussaka recipe. Type it tomorrow. Is she, Nadia, superficially skating this winter over the thin ice that hides what's underneath, deep? The safe will have to have those soft tomatoes cleaned out, first thing in the morning.

Another little jump and she threshes chilly legs. Ridiculous. She'll never get back to sleep now. Everything's so clear, rushing in. She should really get some paper and write all the things down. She'll never remember them in the morning.

Nadia props herself up on one shoulder, reaches an arm out to the dresser by the bed, and tilts the little clock around, bringing it closer so she can see the glowing cool green hands and figures, glowing and dying, glowing in the chilly still night. It is 3:00 a.m.

Pale white moonlight filters through filmy, almost transparent curtains over the small windows, onto the tall dark wardrobe and the opposite wall.

Why can't she sleep?

Yes, there is a sound, just one. The ticking of the clock.

She lies back again and rolls over to face the wall, staring at the blank darkness, away from distraction. Maybe she will be able to sleep now.

Again those little chills flutter up and down her back 'somebody walks upon my grave, somebody walks upon my grave, somebody walks upon my grave, somebody walks upon my grave'.

Then, a long way away, the sound of a car or lorry. A real comfort. There IS still a world outside. It drones up and down, up and down, over the hills and down the valleys, gradually coming closer in the chill clear air. Nadia's quick sigh of relief adds to the sound that now breaks the stillness. Relaxed, she turns over onto her other side, confident that she will at last be able to sleep.

The droning solitary engine rises and falls, rises and falls, louder and louder (Nadia can even hear a gear change). It seems to pause and then to come down the hillside, along the road that leads to the drive. Another pause, and mingled low gear engine noises with the crunch and rattle of sharp edged stones. HER drive! Yes, there are dappled flickering lights outside the bedroom window. It sounds like a powerful engine. Another gear change. The gravel noises are so loud and distinct that it must have rounded the sharp turn at the bottom, a hundred yards from the house. The engine is switched off. It might be at the Hargraves — they are only sixty yards through the trees, just off the drive. Distinctive clicks as a car door opens. Clunk. More silence.

The fine hairs on the lower part of Nadia's neck are prickling. Is that her imagination, or can she feel the faint quivering of the long wooden stairway rising up out of the bushes to her front door? The house is slung high in the forest on slender poles and Nadia's often noticed how sensitive they are to the footsteps of visitors. Perhaps she can hear the tread of unhurried feet up the stairs. Can that be the sound of the front door handle turning? It's hard to tell, because the bedroom door is shut and there's a passage down to the front door. She should sneak out and see. Instead, she shudders and pulls the quilt around her ears, tossing her head back on the pillows. Maybe she hears those unhurried steps again along the wooden veranda and back down the stairs to the drive. Thank God she remembered to lock the doors.

The stillness returns to the night. Nadia is twitching under the quilt, feeling cold all over. Is that the rustle of leaves outside her bedroom window?

A moment later she hears, unmistakably, the sound of slow regular steps up to the back door. There can be no doubt — the steps are on the other side of her bedroom wall. They are on the landing, trying the back

door handle. Turning one way, then the other. Did they turn it to the left or to the right? A tug on the handle. Another tug. It rattles. The steps measure their way unhurriedly back down the stairs. Nadia faces the wall. She can hear the rustling of the leaves on the bushes outside her window. She knows there's no breeze. She doesn't want to see a face peering in at her. But how could it? The bedroom is on poles. It's nine feet off the ground. She relaxes.

She hears the solid clunk of a car door. Filled with the belief that whoever it is will go now, she rolls over again and sees the unwinking dapple of lights through the bedroom window, on the bushes outside. She feels cold and damp inside her heavy woollen nightie.

The thud which beats down the moment of silence seems to be somewhere near the front of the house, down by the drive — underneath the veranda perhaps. And another. And another. There's a barely perceptible tremor running along the floor up the legs of the big brass bedstead, shaking Nadia's body with the finest and most exquisitely delicate earthquake, so delicate that she is not quite sure whether it's really happening. But there's no doubt about the thuds. Their tempo is increasing — blow upon blow now raining down upon God knows what defenceless object.

The attack upon the silence of the night advances with the sharper sounds of splintering screeching wood.

Nadia, quivering with fright, is sure she hears hesitant thuds over near the back of the house as well. They seem to hesitate, gather confidence, and find a rhythm of increasing tempo. There are more screeches of agonized wood coming from the front.

She hears a distinctly metallic ring, very close to her, not far from the bedroom window. A scraping noise is followed by a loud thump, thump, thump, — and the room, the bed and dresser begin a St Vitus dance with their own private and continuing earthquake. It goes on and on and on. Nadia is too frightened to move. She sees the clock jumping towards her over the barely visible polished wooden surface of her vibrating dresser. Its cool glowing hands are at precisely 3:30. The palpitating heart against the inside of her ribs seems to be trying to escape from the nightmare reality in which it is helplessly locked. The whole house is shaking, and a mad chorus of mingled thuds, screeches and creaks, mercilessly assaults her anguished ear drums. And she cannot get rid of them even though she now curls into a ball underneath the covers, stuffing the edges of the quilt in her ears.

'I must get a grip on myself', she mutters. 'I must do something. I must

see if the neighbours can hear what's going on.'

The nearest neighbours, the Hargraves are sixty yards away. But they **MUST** hear, they must.

Without really knowing what she is doing, Nadia throws back the bed-clothes, gets up and creeps quickly across the room to the window. Keeping her face low down by the sill, she peers carefully outside, towards where the Thomas house sprawls among the pine trees. Not a light to be seen. Yet she saw Penny at the dairy late in the afternoon. They **MUST** be home.

Nine feet below her and on the right, Nadia sees flickering lights and three figures, wearing dark cassocks and big peaked hoods. She can't see their faces. She sees the glint of metal on the axes they swing down, biting, it seems, at something underneath the house.

The **POLES**. They must be chopping away at the poles, using the headlights of a big car, dimly seen at the end of the drive, by the front steps.

It's a big old limousine.

Nadia opens her mouth. She wants to shriek, but there's something caught in her throat. She can't make a single sound.

A barely perceptible whiff of smoke wanders past her nostrils, a tendril in the car lights. She wants to choke.

With a tremendous effort she breaks away to the bedroom door, which she opens onto the passage. Her feet are chilled by the cold varnish on the bare planks. There are flickering lights reflected on the wall by the front door.

Nadia smells smoke, quite distinctly, and sees delicate whorls like fine gauze veils, floating and twisting in the dim light.

She rushes into the living room and pressing herself against the front wall, carefully peers around the hanging heavy drapes that border the French window. To her horror she sees a figure, darkly cassocked, with its face obscured by a big hood, standing by the big dark polished limousine. It holds two long sticks clamped together at one end around a bundle of flaming rags. They flicker and glow with a brassy hot light, and bits, haloed with blue fire, fall off. Beyond, there is not a neighbour's light to be seen.

The whole living room is shaking. Her favourite ladder-backed chairs are moving towards her like spirits. There is a heavy jolt. Her cruet falls from its place on the dresser and breaks into small white pieces on the floor. She stoops to pick them up, stands up, drops the pieces and aghast, sees that a crack has opened up between the ceiling and the left hand

wall. It might be an inch wide. Another jolt, and she thinks she feels the floor boards under the rug sag, bending and groaning. Tears want to flood through her eyes and roll down her damp cold cheeks. But they won't come.

She staggers back to the passage, and down to the stairs to the attic. There she leans against the wall, beating her fists against the stained woodwork, her chest heaving.

She stumbles up the narrow staircase, falling twice, barely aware that she's bruised the front of her right leg and stubbed her toe. The smell of smoke is stronger now.

She clammers into the attic and flings herself across a ribbed, timbered chest, weeping quietly, her body shaking, hearing a crackling, feeling the shaking house. Her vision in the dim cold light is fogged by smoke.

She gets to her feet and feels along the wall for a light switch, sobbing. It clicks, but there's no light.

Her feet moving quickly, Nadia almost falls down the staircase, tripping over the hem of her nightie. The floor of the passage feels warm now and seems to be tilting and crunching. She coughs. Her hand gropes through the smoking night for the phone, on the shelf by the wall. The handpiece is cold, her palm clammy. She kneels on the crazily swaying floor and puts her face, damp and cold, close to the dial. She picks up the handpiece. There is no sound. Frantically she dials. She pushes her long thick hair back with one hand and presses the ear piece hard against her ear. There is no sound, no sound at all.

She sees flames flickering through the junction of the floor boards and the passage walls. Gaps are opening up there, at least three inches wide in places. Puffs of dense smoke are rising through them and the air is foggy. A bronzed, warm glow suffuses the passage. Nadia coughs and the rims of her eyes smart. Her feet are now burning hot, as though she was running across the sand dunes on a summer's day.

As she stumbles back up the twisting passage through the smoke towards the front door, she sees through broken panes at either side, the dim and motionless shape of a cassock and hood, and the metallic shine of an axe blade.

Somewhere behind her and to one side, there's an avalanche of splintering crackling timber.

The cassocked figure raises one arm, framed in sparks and clouds of smoke. It beckons her.

Sobbing and coughing, spangled with sparks, her arms and back burning with tiny pins of fire, Nadia turns, stumbles, then crawls along

the buckling passage towards the back door. In a burst of flames, she sees the phone fall in slow motion off its shelf to the floor. The right hand wall leans out, looming for a second over her, and crashes in fragments, tearing fiery gaps in the wall on the other side.

Nadia shrieks. She turns slowly from the fiery barrier. She is ringed with sparks and haloed in orange swirling smoke. Coughing, she shuffles on burning bare feet, back towards the front door. She sees the darkly cassocked figure moving, and hears the ringing metal axe tearing at the front door. It swings open in a vortex of whirling sparks and smoke. The figure now stands still on the miraculously untouched veranda, the long handled axe cradled on a wide sleeved arm. The other man, unhurried, beckons her. She cannot see the face inside the hood. Beyond, the neighbours houses are all in darkness.

She shuffles through the flaming doorway.